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Israel judicial reform explained: What is the crisis about?

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REUTERS

The protests have been some of the biggest in Israel's history

By Raffi Berg

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Israel is in the grip of one of the most serious domestic crises in its history, with uproar over the government's plans to change the way the judicial system works. Here is a brief guide to what is going on.

What is happening in Israel?

Since the start of the year, huge weekly protests have been held by people opposed to the government's reform plans. The scale of the protests has escalated, with hundreds of thousands of people packing the streets in towns and cities across the country.

Undeterred, the government passed into law on Monday the first planned change - a so-called "reasonableness" bill - removing the Supreme Court's power to cancel government decisions it deems unreasonable.

Protesters have called for all the planned reforms to be scrapped and for the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to resign. They are supported by Mr Netanyahu's political rivals, as well as former top officials in Israel's military, intelligence and security services, former chief justices, and prominent legal figures and business leaders amongst others.

In a move which has caused deep concern on both sides, hundreds of military reservists, including air force pilots crucial to Israel's defence, have threatened to refuse to report for service. This has led to warnings that it could leave the country's security seriously exposed.

What are people so angry about?

Mr Netanyahu's opponents say the reforms will severely undermine the country's democracy by weakening the judicial system, the only tool for keeping the government's use of its power in check.

Underlying this is strong opposition to the kind of government currently in office - the most right-wing in Israel's history - and to Mr Netanyahu himself.

Critics say the reforms will shield Mr Netanyahu, who is currently on trial for alleged corruption (he denies the charges) and help the government pass laws without any brakes.

The government argues that the judiciary interferes too much with legislation, is biased in support of liberal issues and is undemocratic in the way judges are selected.

What are the legal reforms at the centre of the crisis?

They concern the power of the government versus the power of the courts to scrutinise and even overrule the government. The government - and others - say reform is overdue, though the plans go much further than many people would like.

Besides the "reasonableness" law, the government wants to:

- Weaken the power of the Supreme Court to review or throw out laws, enabling a simple majority of one in the Knesset (parliament) to overrule such decisions
- Have a decisive say over who becomes a judge, including in the Supreme Court, by increasing its representation on the committee which appoints them
- Scrap the requirement for ministers to obey the advice of their legal advisers - guided by the attorney general - which they currently have to do by law

How far will the crisis go?

With fury on the streets and a battle of wills playing out, the crisis seems likely to intensify.

Mr Netanyahu has said he will try and reach wide public agreement on the rest of the reforms during the Knesset's summer recess (August to mid-October).

The prime minister is however dependent on far-right ministers in his cabinet, without whose support his government could collapse. Those ministers have insisted the reforms must be passed and not watered down.

The opposition says it will not re-enter talks unless the process is stopped.

Israel's main labour union has threatened a general strike and protesters are vowing to step up their action, with no end to the turmoil in sight.

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